

Mortar Training and Integration

by Captain Michael A. Porcelli

As a tanker, I enjoy reading about and learning from my fellow tankers' past experiences. However, as a tanker in an armor battalion, nothing prepared me to lead 11Cs. I attended the Infantry Mortars Leaders Course (IMLC) before taking command of the platoon, but nothing in my military career had prepared me for the mortars. Even my predecessor did not really have any useful tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) or advice to give me as he was leaving — except to watch out for a few troublemakers. Does this sound familiar to those of you who have been mortar platoon leaders?

At first, I felt a little lost leading a platoon so different from my tanking experiences; with time, a lot of listening, and active learning, my platoon sergeant and I turned our platoon into one of the best mortar platoons in the brigade. However, this article is not about me, but about you — the future mortar platoon leader. What are your training objectives for next quarter? When are you firing next? When is your next mortar training and evaluation program (MORTEP)? Are your men trained in their individual tasks, how about gunnery and fire direction center (FDC) tasks? And the most important

question, are your mortars ready to go to war and support the battalion? These are questions I asked myself, and questions that I have been asked as a mortar platoon leader. And with a hard swallow, I had to give the answers, even when I first took over the platoon.

This article is not about mortar capabilities, limitations, and how mortars are generally used incorrectly in a battalion. This article is about coming up with an effective training program for not only 11Cs, but also battalion leaders, to include junior noncommissioned officers (NCOs). That's right — you will train tankers along with your mortarmen. Remember, mortar platoon leaders, we fight as a combined-arms team, and that team includes you. With training integrated at battalion and company levels, the 19Ks and 19Ds will have a general understanding of how long it takes to conduct a hasty occupation or fire a hip-shot, or the process it takes to set up the guns and process the firing data. In the end, mortars will not only be used more, but more correctly.

First, let's start big and work our way down. As a mortar platoon leader, you

must be the resident expert on mortars, which requires a little reading. However, your wealth of knowledge will be bestowed on you by your platoon sergeant — if you do not pick this man's brain, you are a fool. A typical mortar platoon sergeant has between 15-to-18 years as a mortarman, and has most likely served in light, heavy, and cavalry units. This is the man to assist you in creating a training program that works, and he acts as a sounding board for your training ideas. This goes for all 11C NCOs and soldiers. You will never meet a more professional bunch of soldiers in your career, and each one is willing to do what it takes to be the best mortar platoon in the brigade.

A mortar platoon leader must be very proactive — ranges and ammo just do not mysteriously appear each time you train. Mortar platoon leaders must now request these things to conduct training events. Mortar platoon leaders will discover that they are like mini-company commanders and, as such, must ensure all necessary training resources are available. The two best candidates to assist in this task are the platoon sergeant and FDC chief. Most likely, your platoon sergeant and FDC chief have been on post longer than





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you, and have a greater knowledge of what ranges or training areas could best support your upcoming training event.

Mortar platoon leaders, let's talk about how you must integrate into the battalion staff. "But hold on, I'm not part of the battalion staff; I'm just a platoon leader." Negative, mortar platoon leader, check your manuals, such as U.S. Army Field Manual, 7-90, *Tactical Employment of Mortars*,¹ and remember your IMLC training.¹ The mortar platoon is the personal artillery battery for the battalion commander. Sure, the fire support officer (FSO) will have a general understanding of what mortars can do and help during the planning process, but if the mortar platoon leader is not present during the military decisionmaking process (MDMP), he will receive firing points that do not completely integrate into the battalion's scheme of maneuver, and he will receive essential fire support tasks that are not specific enough to fire priority targets. The mortar platoon leader must make himself part of the battalion staff, and be present during the wargaming process. This will not only help him come up with an operation order, but en-

sure that there is proper integration between him and the battalion maneuver elements, which will ensure rapid, accurate fires when needed. The mortar platoon leader must also be prepared during the MDMP to brief his current operational status, number of on-hand rounds, and the possible number of missions the platoon can fire with the current amount of ammunition. Bring worksheets that might pertain to the next mission, especially the quick smoke worksheet — to brief approximately how many white phosphorus rounds are needed for a smoke mission. Do not forget the logistics of being in the mortars — another reason the mortar platoon leader needs to be present during the MDMP. Based on the unit's course of action, the mortar platoon leader can advise the S3 FSO on how much ammo each target will require, at what point in the battle the platoon will need a mobile push package (MPP), or if they need the MPP to move with them. The mortar platoon leader can tell the S4, who is standing right next to the S3 during the MDMP, what sort of ammo break down he will need in the MPP, based on the type of missions the platoon will be firing.

"What about my platoon during all this wargaming — don't I need to be with them to make sure they are doing everything I need them to do?" Negative, mortar platoon leader, you will come to find out that you will spend a lot of time away from your platoon in the field, coordinating, attending the MDMP, attending operation orders, and reconning alternate firing points. Again, this is why the mortar platoon leader needs a good working relationship with his platoon sergeant and FDC chief. These are the men who get things done for the platoon. With a good working relationship with the platoon sergeant and FDC chief, a good tactical SOP, and a five-point contingency plan, the mortar platoon will do great things when the platoon leader is not present, leaving him time to do other things.

Now we will focus on the platoon. When the mortar platoon leader first takes the platoon, he knows what the battalion's mission essential task list (METL) is and what collective tasks the platoon must accomplish to support the METL. Once the platoon leader and platoon sergeant have designed the essential platoon collective tasks, write them down, and show them to the battalion commander for his review. Make sure the battalion commander has no other tasks he wants you to train, and once he reviews the task list, have him approve it.

Now that we have the collective tasks narrowed down, we will crosswalk them with section and individual tasks then incorporate the section and individual tasks into the collective tasks. With these tasks in mind, the platoon leader should sit down with the platoon sergeant and identify individual and section tasks that need to be trained, then move on to the collective platoon tasks. A great source of information to identify tasks that need to be trained is the platoon's last MORTEP or combat training center evaluation.

Individual, section, and platoon collective tasks to be trained have been identified, now it is time to review the battalion training schedule (these schedules should reflect out to 5 to 6 months, depending on the unit) to determine where these tasks can be accomplished. Once training requirements have been determined, the battalion S3 or XO should review the requirements to ensure your training does not conflict with the battalion training calendar (things do tend to change on the long-term training calendar; so this is a good last check prior to planning for training, and it also informs

the S3 and XO what the platoon is doing in advance). Once you determine when these tasks are to be trained, compile a list of resources needed to accomplish training and request them through the S3 section and/or HHC company commander. Now it is time to determine the near-term training calendar (in some units this is done 6, 5, or 3 weeks out). Publish these training calendars and have them approved by the battalion XO or S3, and once approved, they should be posted for all soldiers to review and discuss the upcoming training events (squad leaders should be the ones doing this, however, it's always good to hear it from the platoon leader once in a while).

Each unit is different in their abilities and levels of training. I will give some TTPs that might help your training program and integration into the battalion.

Individual soldier training. As we all know, these are the basic tasks that soldiers must know and apply; it is the foundation on which all other training can grow. One of the best ways to knock out the majority of individual tasks is to conduct expert infantry badge (EIB) training. Tasks in the EIB encompass many things, including weapons qualification, land navigation, emplacing mines, and a high state of physical fitness. Most of these tasks make for great sergeant's time training. Fight for the mortar platoon to go to the EIB test. Remember, the men you are in charge of are infantrymen — the only infantrymen in an armor battalion — and as such many times battalion leaders will not put a whole lot of emphasis on the EIB. Make them understand the importance of the EIB and get your men to go, otherwise lose their respect. Couple the constant EIB training with constant gunner's exam training. How hard is it to accomplish two or three gunner's exam tasks per week? Not difficult at all. Some tasks can be performed in the motor pool, while others can be trained just outside the motor pool. The best thing about it is, you don't need that many resources.

Crew-level training. Once crewmembers are individually trained and proficient on individual tasks, each member should be cross-trained within the crew. Drivers, gunners, assistant gunners, and tank commanders need to train at each position to remain proficient in all crew-level tasks. That new private that was just assigned as a driver should be cross-trained on other positions because he may be the new gunner or tank commander at

the National Training Center when other crewmembers have been killed. Squad leaders should already be doing this, but just spot check and always ask if PV2 Smith can take over SGT White's job. Do not forget about the FDC, they need to be training for the FDC exam. Once the FDC section is cross-trained, gun crews should be cross-trained in FDC procedures. This is easy and can be done as sergeant's time training. Have the FDC chief or senior computer operator train the gun crews — especially the squad leaders — on the M16 plotting board and the mortar ballistic computer. Mortar platoon leaders should attend this training as well, not only to spot check, but also to maintain proficiency in FDC and crew tasks. When a unit goes to the NTC and the FDC gets killed, guess who's processing the calls for fire — the mortar platoon leader and his base gun. Two computers should be kept with the FDC, one with the platoon leader, and one with the base gun, along with plenty of copies of computer records and data sheets. Ensure all computers have the initial set-up data. The platoon leader should keep one aiming circle and leave one with the FDC.

Section/platoon training and higher. This is where a mortar platoon leader makes his money. Train not only the mortar platoon, but battalion leaders as well. First, strive to train constantly with the FSO, fire support team (FIST), and observers in every type of platoon, or battalion training exercise. This will form the habitual relationship with the FSO and the FIST. The habitual relationship will be formed with the FSO during the MDMP, but it is necessary to coordinate for the battalion's FIST to be present at whatever type of training you conduct. However, in some armor battalions, the most effective observers — the scouts — almost never train with the mortars. Every scout needs to be proficient in calling for indirect fire, and the only way they can become proficient is to train with the mortar platoon. The mortar platoon leader should coordinate with the scout platoon leader and see when he is taking his platoon out for training, and have two mortar platoons go out at the same time. As scouts conduct area, route, or zone reconnaissance, mortars can maneuver to firing points that support the scout's scheme of maneuver and process their calls for fire. When the mortar platoon conducts live fire, ask the scout platoon to come along and call in fire missions. Coordinate with the company command-

er to conduct call for fire classes for the scout companies, which also makes for great sergeants' time training. This adds realism to both training events and creates the habitual relationships needed to be successful.

Now that we are training the scouts, we need to train the rest of the battalion. The mortar platoon leader should talk with the battalion commander, and during one platoon training event, have all platoon sergeants and above in the battalion observe training. In essence, the mortar platoon leader will be demonstrating what a hip-shot, hasty occupation, deliberate occupation looks like, and how long it takes to conduct each. Using short-range training rounds (SRTRs), let the platoon sergeants call for fire on mock targets to complete their understanding of what it takes to fire a mission. (If the mortar platoon tells you that they do not have any SRTRs, then they are probably lying to you — these rounds are inert and only require an \$18 per-round refurbish kit to use again.). Once the platoon sergeants have observed training, let all tank commanders and above in the battalion observe the next live fire exercise and call in missions.

I hope this article assists in training mortar platoons in an armor battalion. You will find a great appreciation for mortars and what they can do on the battlefield as a force multiplier. In closing, let me say it was an honor and privilege to lead such professional and motivated soldiers — as it will be for all mortar platoon leaders.



Notes

¹U.S. Army Field Manual, 7-90, *Tactical Employment of Mortars*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 9 October 1992.

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